

Singer and Songwriter Earl Robinson Dies at 81

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From News Services

SEATTLE—Earl Robinson, 81, the singer-composer who memorialized the plight of the U.S. laborer in such hit songs as "Joe Hill," died July 20 at a hospital here as a result of injuries he received in a traffic accident in West Seattle that day.

Authorities said he died after his car was struck head-on by a utility truck that crossed the median line. The other driver, a 64-year-old man, suffered minor injuries, authorities said. The accident is under investigation.

Mr. Robinson's tunes have chronicled the U.S. labor movement since the Great Depression. They include "Ballad for Americans," sung by Paul Robeson; "The House I Live In," recorded by Frank Sinatra; "Hurry Sundown," sung by Peter, Paul and Mary; and "Black and White," which became a hit for Three Dog Night in 1972.

His most famous song, "Joe Hill," was a 1938 ballad about a labor organizer whose fighting spirit lived on after his execution by a Utah firing squad in 1914.

"Joe Hill" was heard by millions of people when Joan Baez revived it at the 1969 Woodstock Festival. Her performance was featured in a movie about the festival.

Mr. Robinson sang "Joe Hill" in April at a labor music conference in Port Townsend, Wash., where he also participated in seminars, teaching how to write labor songs.

*"The copper bosses shot you, Joe.
They killed you Joe," says I.
Takes more than guns to kill a man."*

*Says Joe, "I didn't die."
Says Joe, "I didn't die."
From San Diego up to Maine
In every mine and mill
Where common folks defend
their rights*

*It's there you'll find Joe Hill
It's there you'll find Joe Hill.
I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last
night,*

*Alive as you and me.
Said I, "But, Joe, you're 10
years dead."*

*"I never died," said he.
"I never died," said he.*

His "Ballad for Uncle Sam," which originally appeared at the end of the short-running Broadway production "Sing for your Supper," was later renamed "Ballad for Americans" for use on the television program "The Pursuit of Happiness."

Mr. Robinson was a native of Washington state and graduate of the University of Washington. After college, unable to find work as a music teacher, he decided to become a folk singer and moved to New York City. He then joined the Workers' Laboratory Theater as a performer and songwriter.

He was blacklisted during the McCarthy Era for his political views.

"I stayed in the Communist Party too long," he said in a 1989 interview. "I quietly dropped out in the blacklist days. The party still has something to say, but I'm not sure it has anything worth listening to. The latest thing for me is spiritual."

His wife, the former Helen Worts, whom he married in 1937, died in 1963.

Dear professors and others too young to remember or not yet born,

That Earl Robinson gets the lead obit in today's

Post and that it is not unfriendly is both a pleasant surprise and a reflection of the fact that there have been some changes in national and media attitudes toward the past and its abuses of the innocent. In Robinson's case, of the intensely patriotic. I recall nothing in any of his music that even the most irrational could consider unpatriotic. But in those days when union organization was under massive and not infrequently official opposition (the American Legion was then supplying strikebreakers and the sitdowns were just beginning), his support for union organization was in itself enough to get him blacklisted.

John Latouche (?) collaborated, as I recall, on the then very popular, "Ballad for Americans." We have, I'm sure, the RCA album of Paul Robeson singing it with a choir. Ten-inch 78s. Later reissued as a record and as a cassette.

What this obit does not include is that when Wendell Willkie was a GOP candidate for president at the Philadelphia convention arrangements had been made for Robeson to sing this song there. The ultras of that day objected. There was a compromise: the ballad would be sung but not by Robeson. It was aired by radio coast-to-coast.

"Joe Hill" was immensely popular before Baez revived it. It was sung at all kinds of meetings, not just those in support of labor.

The number of murders in anti-labor activities in those days is quite large. A few were exposed in official investigations long forgotten, including those of before the Squire investigation of which I was part that began in 1936. That they were so clearly intended murders is reflected by the fact there was not a single protest when as the committee's editor I titled out hearings on those by and for Republic Steel in Chicago in Tam Girler's day, a name probably strange to most of you, "The Chicago Memorial Day Massacre." That was 1937 and included many cities in addition to Chicago.

Steel was a more flagrant case. There were many more anti-union murders in mining, perhaps the greatest number being in Harlan County, Ky., known as "Bloody Harlan." (As some of you know, the Department of Justice borrowed me from the Senate for that prosecution of 60 some corporate and deputized thug defendants. It then was child's play for defense counsel to fix the sequestered jury and when I learned who and how did it and wasn't believed I returned to my Senate job knowing there would be no convictions. The operators bought the mortgages of all jurors who owned their homes, let the wives know, and the wives let the jurors know. I was told by the clerk of federal court, who'd been told by the U.S. marshals, neither trusting either the FBI or DJ lawyers. I have those hearings and believe they are rich in story, book and thesis materials. They include also hearings on the supplying of labor spies (I wrote the brief for the first hearings on this), strikebreakers and industrial munitions. I almost got fired for introducing a new technique, "citizens" organizations and their buying elements of the media. Literally. H